

## SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL NORMS

*by Clifford Barrett*

It would seem of as great importance to scrutinize the reliability of norms one is applying, as that of one or another way of applying them. Actually, however, a contrary procedure is more usual—for many will comply and insist upon the compliance of others, with particular norms of inference, valuation and action, stake principal hopes upon their soundness, and perhaps devote years of effort to their meticulous application, all with scarcely a serious effort to determine just how probable it may be that the favored norms really warrant any such trust. There are some areas of interest within which this way of proceeding may arise from the implicit faith of believers in a divinely revealed sanction of certain norms. But elsewhere and more widely, doubtless it is accepted in preference to confronting difficulties of critical inquiry on as fundamental a level as the justifying grounds of one's group's governing ideas and valuations, established aims, policies, and institutional systems.

That many should feel such hesitancy is not strange—much as it is understandable that less experienced climbers are likely to feel uncomfortable with the thought that they should continually watch their foothold. But it is surprising to find experts who appear oblivious to any such need. We must suppose the experienced investigator—for instance in a field of social interest such as economics, politics, or law—has other reasons than intellectual timidity for his reluctance to press his inquiries into basic normative issues, toward their eventual untanglement. It might be expected that he would consider critically the norms he employs, from the standpoint of their adequacy to deal with more essential aspects of his subject matter—especially the distinctive aspects which uniquely differentiate the nature of its phenomena. In social inquiry, for example, will not the competent investigator critically scrutinize his norms from the standpoint of their adequacy to treat the ground-assumptions of fact and valuation, whatever they may be, upon which a given society bases its whole structure of working norms?

A familiar reply to suggestions that he do so, has taken the form of an appeal to *fact*. Is it not the business of the scientist in social as well as other areas, to describe accurately what *is*—not to imagine or attempt to

judge what *ought to be*? How can anyone measure or verify a society's prevailing conceptions of what ought to be, or establish the real *rightness* of its principal norms when these are shaped in terms of some imaginatively projected ideal aims? Since it is the function of social norms to properly direct thinking and acting toward desirable future consequences, they must be based upon speculative estimates of the potentials of people and things. At a particular time, tests for the soundness of a norm virtually must amount to tests of reliability for whatever predictions of future consequences assuredly are to be anticipated from its use. In the case of social norms which involve valuations, expressive of varyingly *desirable* aspects to be experienced in the consequences, matters are further complicated by a need to weigh predictions in terms of what will prove generally pleasing or otherwise in the tumultuous world of human feelings and desires. In short, social norms implying valuations must be recognized as constructions shaped by human imagination to implement its ideal ends—norms seemingly well-adapted to perform their function of insuring satisfactions of needs in a near or more distant future—hence in a still only imaginatively constructed world. Is it strange that such normative creations should vary radically with times and localities? But is it not also clear that issues of real validity or of verification in the case of these diverse normative idealizations that imagination projects as standard criteria for social behavior, must lie quite without the ambit of true *scientific* inquiry? It is of course unfortunate if this frequently leaves the treatment of powerful social sentiments chiefly to the sentimentalist, who may know little of what sound scientific thinking means—but we are asked, is it not the only course open to the responsible social scientist?

Affirmative answers on the part of a good many social scientists have been supported in at least two ways—one, by the familiar assertion that it is the function of true science to describe accurately and classify *facts* as they are found. It is not to interpret their significance or attempt their valuation in terms of human interests. Hence, critical problems of norms which involve questions of justifiable valuations, are not germane to social study which deserves to be called "scientific." Let inquiries that would be worthy of being valued and trusted by men as truly "scientific," sternly eschew all consideration of basic validity in social valuations, devoting themselves instead wholeheartedly to facts—especially those susceptible of exact objective observation and statistical tabulation.

A second support for a radically factualist attitude has been found in a differing argument which sees no serious difficulty at all about the way to determine a society's proper valuational norms. It may indeed be the case that inquiry entirely faithful to scientific method in such fields as law, economics, and politics, cannot remain altogether oblivious to the validity of common norms of human significance and valuation. But these norms need

only be tested by the plainly observable facts of relevant situations. Indeed, sound valuational norms are precisely those which have been *derived from correctly established facts*—and not from any ideology or anyone's imaginative idealizations.

Both of these ways of escape for the social scientist from questions of critical justification—whether for social norms or those he himself employs in treating social phenomena—are confronted by certain difficulties. One of these, and perhaps the most damaging, arises from the essential nature of the “facts” to which such arguments would ascribe finality. “Fact” is, of course, an ambiguous word, likely to be used one moment as a designation for what is *really the case*—but the next as a name for what the speaker, or his group or age, on some ground deemed convincing, *thinks is really the case*. Taken as a synonym for “final reality,” “facts” would be indubitably certain—if we could also certainly possess any of them. On the other hand, taken as *interpretative constructions* from material of empirical impressions and assumptions of coherent thought, and tested for reliability by criteria that seem convincing in terms of the prevailing idea-system of a time and place, our “known facts” may be numerous, of indispensable worth, and often, in all probability, most reliable constructions—but never surely beyond possible need of future reconsideration and revision. Now either of these usages of the word might be well enough if adhered to consistently—the trouble comes when they are confused, making “fact” mean *actual reality* at one moment, and at the next what seems *a reliable way of construing* what is real. Surely no age has seen greater alterations in the “plain” or “indubitable” facts of the past, than our own.

It is an elementary recognition that our experienced and known facts—which are the only ones we may well consider—in any literal sense, never are simply “given,” or “found” ready-made for the taking. All are, of course, conditioned by human modes of perception, shaped and defined in terms of prevailing systems of ideas, as well as verified by whatever criteria of truth and value such a system assumes and approves. Assuredly this does not mean that all constructions of fact are altogether factitious, or that all are to be dismissed in a spirit of dogmatic scepticism as equally unreliable. What it does indicate is that trust in any facts must be at root trust in the justifiability of the *systematic grounds* that have determined its specific formulation and acceptance. And these systematic grounds can only be such through normative requirements which demand that one construction rather than some other shall be accepted as actual “fact.” Thus trust in facts, far from constituting a substitute for critical scrutiny of norms or appraisal of their reliability, necessarily turns out to be trust in the particular systematic norms apart from which no idea of *these* particular facts would exist in men's minds. Indeed, without some systematic norms for their formulation and acceptance, there would clearly be no notion of facts among human

beings, only manifold unorganized impressions—but then we would scarcely be human beings.

My point is, that *fact* and *norm* are both essentially systematic terms—both are inseparably dependent within a people's total idea-system—both confront the social scientist who seeks any fundamental understanding of his subject matter with what are at root identical problems of verification. These pertain first, to whether a particular fact or norm adequately satisfies what a system of ideas—scientific, religious, economic, political, legal, *etc.*—requires. But further, they pertain to whether requirements of the system rest upon normative assumptions that are actually justifiable.

Within the whole prevailing idea-system of a time and place, all recognized facts are construed in terms of particular segmental systems of interest—all are facts within more or less specialized frames of reference, facts of one kind or another. So it happens that the "factual world" to which a science of economics, politics, or law is germane, is quite a different one than the "factual world" to which a science of chemistry, physics, or astronomy pertains. There may of course be much in common, but all construe their facts in systematic terms—which means with reference to different, though obviously related, systems. The facts, as they are construed in terms of a particular system, bear characteristics of the system—and this, not merely as superficial aspects, but as essential characteristics without which they simply would not be the kind of facts they are. Thus, for example, beyond characteristics of a physical system, such as space-time relations, or motion and causality, *biological* facts possess essential characteristics of a recognized system of specifically *organic* relationships. They are not less real facts for this, however, and the biologist who sought to avoid consideration of aspects of his facts which were distinctively organic characteristics would not be serving science, but effacing his field of inquiry. And surely it cannot be the demand of a truly scientific attitude that one ignore what is peculiar to the subject matter of his field, but, rather, that he seek adequate ways of dealing effectively with what may be unique to it.

One distinctive characteristic of much of the factual subject matter with which an investigator must deal in any area of *social* inquiry is the presence of human motivation as a shaping cause of relationships, attitudes and activities. Irrespective of any hypothesis one may choose to hold regarding a "freedom of will" at the basis of motivation, it is clear that in no presently recognizable way can this motivation of men in society be systematized in any such regular order, for example, as that evident in chemical reactions. Thus, while the chemist may find norms for his judgments and choices (*e.g.*, of hypotheses) that are implied in a rigidly regular system of relations—imaginatively idealized as universal by his forerunners and subsequently abundantly tested—successful norms for a social science cannot

well be grounded in assumptions of any such predictably undeviating, or mechanical, regularity. They must be established upon predictable agreements of a different kind, i.e., predictable motivating values.

Understood in terms of the relations of a system which involves motivation, recognized facts acquire a new dimension as an intrinsic part of their nature. That is, they acquire future projections—the recognized facts becoming *what* they are, to a large extent, by virtue of more or less desirable potentials of future consequence. Bradley pointed out that we recognize a thing as a factual reality, rather than illusion, through its continuing to be what it was—and nothing is more familiar than Bergson's brilliant work in showing the large place memory holds in establishing all factual knowledge. But some manner of imaginative construction of its near, if not distant, future being and significance is similarly indispensable to every construction in thought and experience which we designate as "a fact."

This future dimension in our known facts doubtless is due to their being constituted both by the nature of what is known and our particular human way of knowing and taking interest in it. It is characteristic of all living beings that their actions are somehow directed toward the future, though with simpler creatures presumably with no conscious purpose on their part. Higher animals frequently show measures of foresight. Human beings, however, possess a further degree of mentality—of which the crucial test, in William James's phrase, is a capacity to select future ends and choose means for their attainment. For man, as Cassirer said, "to think of the future and to live in the future, is a necessary part of his nature." Implied in this are human capacities for deliberate valuations. Man's life of thought and action—rather than of "torpid stupor"—is due to his shaping, not merely some *single* image for the future, toward which he might then remain passive, but numerous and diverse images. Among these he may attempt value-judgments of more and less desirable. Thereafter he may direct his actions accordingly—earning the distinction of being an intelligent self-directing creature. Further, among the possible images is that which would be *best* for the future—one in terms of which other images are to be appraised relatively. True, there may be scant hope of achieving this *best* state of affairs in its entirety at any foreseeable date. But it serves to provide a criterion by which to determine the relative merits of more easily accessible ends and courses of action. In short, it permits translation of preferred ideal-ends into working objectives, with meanings that pass beyond temporary requirements of prudence to more comprehensive considerations of policy—and perhaps occasionally to imperatives of wisdom.

Norms are by nature guides—their claims of validity imply preferable future consequences for judgments, valuations and actions which comply with them. Difficulties in their verification by a scientific method



have been described in diverse ways which usually in the end come back to this—how can constructions of imagination, which are not observable facts at all in an objective sense, ever be scientifically verified? What I have wished to suggest here is that the social scientist is faced by remarkably similar and to a considerable extent the same difficulties, whether he attempts to verify in any basic way, either the norms—political, legal, economic—that live in a people's dominant idea-system, or the constructions of fact which live in the system. Indeed, the factual constructions depend upon the normative assumptions in a system of thinking in terms of which they are effected. This does not mean that neither norms nor facts can be verified with a high degree of probability. But it does suggest that the impassable gulf frequently supposed to separate the soundly verifiable facts of a scientific social inquiry, from the gossamer-winged ideal norms fashioned by a society's imagination, is itself one of the more unfortunate products of imagination. But why should imagination, in its saner manifestations, be equated with mere fancy or wishful thinking? Has it not been responsible for every major advance since the Stone Age—each in turn proceeding through imaginative insight—in the case of social attitudes and institutional life, insight which revised or displaced old valuational norms for new. For whatever we may think of it, we may hardly deny that our civilization, as Professor Tsanoff has observed, "is what it is and where it is because of our choice and scale of values."

There is slight room for question that it must always be so. The pertinent question is why society should be deprived by the social scientist of a penetrating examination of the norms it lives by, from those who possess competent skill and experience in critical investigation. It was an error of the seventeenth century, that it tended to equate the meaning of "scientific spirit" with the use of a specific and limited methodology—useful in some areas, but absurd in the borrowed applications of "social physics." Is it not the essence of scientific wisdom that everywhere method follows the requirements for sound and adequate understanding? It is not the function of a method of inquiry to determine what is to be examined or neglected in the basic nature of its subject matter, but to provide a competent means of examination for whatever of consequence is present to be explored. Scientific method has seen many revisions and enlargements to achieve effective competence in distinctive fields. Why should the social scientist remain timid or unimaginative in developing fundamental adaptations which will enable him to deal cogently and critically with normative issues of his phenomena—even to the basic value-assumptions from which they come?